

Autocracy In America

ON March 26th, the employees of the Washington Railway and Electric Company sent fifty thousand petitions to Congress asking for an investigation of the lockout and strike which has crippled one of the major public utilities of the District of Columbia for more than six weeks. A strike investigating committee, headed by Senator Hughes, was appointed, but its organization has been delayed because of resignations due to the pressure of war business. The committee has been reconstituted, and it is expected that public hearings will begin before the end of this week. It is to be hoped that war news will not crowd all reports of these hearings from the daily press. For the principle at stake between the Washington Railway Company and its striking employees is fundamentally the same as that in defense of which America has declared war upon Germany. Autocracy and democracy are struggling for supremacy on the transportation systems of the national capital.

There are two principal street car systems in Washington, the Capital Traction Company and the Washington Railway and Electric Company. Last February, the Amalgamated Association of Street and Electric Railway Employees in behalf of the men moved for a renewal of their collective agreements with both of these corporations. The Capital Traction Company coöperated with the representatives of the union in drafting a new agreement. The negotiations seem to have proceeded in the most friendly spirit. The men are enthusiastic over the new arrangement, not only because it provides an advance in wages, but especially because it grants them some measure of democratic participation in arranging schedules and other matters designed to increase the efficiency of the service. The Washington Railway and Electric Company, on the other hand, refused to renew relations with the union, although the existing collective agreement had been carried out in good faith by the men. Instead, it adopted the autocratic tactics which the New York Railways Company and the Interborough used so effectively against the Amalgamated last autumn. The men were ordered to sign individual agreements, binding them for three years to a wage schedule dictated by the company and involving the abandonment of their organization, as a condition of employment. Since a large majority of the men refused to destroy their union by signing this individual working agreement, the company's order operated as a lockout and on Monday evening, March 12th, some thousand men quit work.

The history of the strike runs significantly paral-

lel with that on the New York street car lines last year. The Board of District Commissioners offered to mediate, but to no purpose. The men accepted the offer; the company declined. For some days the strike proceeded in quiet. Then hundreds of professional strike-breakers poured into the city. As in New York, these gentlemen appeared to have commissions that placed them above the ordinary rules of law. Accidents due to incompetence and recklessness were of almost daily occurrence. These guests of the company boasted that they were being paid more than the oldest employees of the company had ever received. They pocketed fares openly, mulcted passengers of their coin. In Washington, one customarily buys six tickets for a quarter. "When tickets were requested," runs a report in the Washington Post, "the passenger would often receive five loose tickets and the conductor would pocket the quarter. Any protest was received with an uncompromising look or a laugh." As in New York, too, these smooth-fingered gentlemen were shown every consideration by the police. They were protected against all possible annoyance by the citizen strikers as if they were guests of the city. One night a car was held up, the passengers discharged, the car set running wild. Fifteen striking conductors and motormen were arrested. The Washington Railway Company, again following the example of the New York corporations, published flaring advertisements charging that the leaders of the Amalgamated were irresponsible men, that they were notorious law-breakers and inciters to violence, and that for the company to deal with them would be a betrayal of public trust. The assault upon property, alleged to have been the work of a small number of men whose sense of fair play had been outraged by the protected lawlessness of the imported strike-breakers, alienated public opinion.

The loss of a strike under ordinary circumstances is a more or less commonplace incident to the fortunes of war. But the loss of this strike, if, as in New York, it results in a sweeping victory for the individual working agreement, will be a vital blow not only to collective bargaining, but also to the future of industrial democracy in America. The individual contract imposed upon their employees by the New York transportation companies was a sufficiently drastic assertion of industrial autocracy, but it is mild compared with the ingenious instrument invented by the Washington corporation. In extenuation of its autocratic severity, the company pleads a demand of the Amalgamated that good standing in the union, as defined by the union itself, should be made a condition of employment and discharge. This demand, obviously intended to give the union a margin for compromise in the course

of negotiations, never came to conference owing to the company's refusal to treat with the Amalgamated. It did not prove a bar to an agreement with the Capital Traction Company. It was similar to a demand of the Amalgamated made in New York and promptly modified in the conference over which Mayor Mitchel presided. But the Washington Railway and Electric Company advances it as a principal reason why "the company is dealing with its individual trainmen, who are signing a contract for a term of three years." In support of this contract, the company asserts that it provides "a liberal wage increase." As a matter of fact, the increases vary from one-half cent an hour for men who have been employed less than one year, to three cents an hour for men who have had an unblemished record for ten years or more. The maximum rate as published by the company, after ten years of service, will be thirty cents an hour, which on the basis of a twelve hour day and one day's rest in seven, is a trifle more than the amount which the City of New York has fixed as the minimum required to maintain the families of unskilled workmen in decency and health.

But the most impressive clause in the contract is that which provides for the adjustment of grievances. Individual employees, appearing in person or represented by any other employee in the same class of service, are permitted to present grievances on the second and fourth Tuesday of each month to the Superintendent, who shall give them a hearing. An appeal from his decision may be taken on the third Tuesday of the month to the President of the company, "who shall hear such appeal and correct any erroneous decision of the Superintendent. And within ten days thereafter any such grievance not satisfactorily disposed of in the foregoing manner shall be referred to the Public Utilities Commission of the District of Columbia." The findings of the Commission shall be final and binding upon both parties. The company further agrees "to at all times conform to and obey any and all such decisions, and that this contract shall in all things be liberally construed so as to provide an effectual and constantly available remedy to adjudicate all controversies which may at any time arise."

By this amazing ukase, the officers of the company will act as judge and jury of all complaints against themselves. It would be a bold trainman who would go over the heads of the Superintendent and President of the company, both of whom retain absolute powers of discharge. Any attempt at collective action on the part of the men, for the redress of any grievance whatsoever, would not only make them liable to immediate discharge for insubordination, but would also expose them to legal prosecution. If the strike is broken on this issue those

men who have begun to build homes and who will be forced into submission by the economic needs of their families, will gain fresh insight into the Thirteenth Amendment to the Federal Constitution.

The power of the company to enforce its autocratic will against its disorganized employees is absolute. That such power should be uncompromisingly exercised by the holders of a public franchise and especially of a street railway franchise in the national capital is an outrage upon the very principle of democracy. The brutalizing effect of its use is matter of common observation to everyone whose business brings him into daily contact with the cowed and shame-faced men who are operating the surface lines under the individual agreement imposed upon them by the New York companies. It destroys the self-respect and sense of moral integrity which is essential to good citizenship in a democracy. In New York, the companies applied their power ruthlessly in defiance of the attempted intervention of the Mayor and the Chairman of the Public Service Commission. The Washington company has declined the good offices of the governing board of the District. For the sake of decent and harmonious industrial relationships, which have such critical importance to the nation at this time, we hope that the Strike Investigating Committee of the United States Senate will be effective in arousing the public opinion not only of Washington, but of the entire country to the menace to our democratic institutions latent in the individual working agreement signed under duress. If the street railway employees of Washington are forced to surrender their legal right of collective action, the autocratic invasion of their liberty will cast a cloud of suspicion over the minds of millions of wage-workers to whom democracy in their daily employment is as precious as democracy in Europe.

The New REPUBLIC *A Journal of Opinion*

PUBLISHED WEEKLY AND COPYRIGHT, 1917, IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA BY THE REPUBLIC PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC., 421 WEST TWENTY-FIRST STREET, NEW YORK, N. Y. HERBERT CROLY, PRESIDENT, ROBERT HALLOWELL, TREASURER.

EDITORS

HERBERT CROLY
PHILIP LITTELL

WALTER LIPPMANN
FRANCIS HACKETT

ALVIN JOHNSON
GEORGE SOULE—Assistant Editor

YEARLY SUBSCRIPTION, FIFTY-TWO ISSUES, FOUR DOLLARS IN ADVANCE. SINGLE COPIES TEN CENTS. CANADIAN SUBSCRIPTION FOUR DOLLARS AND FIFTY CENTS PER YEAR IN ADVANCE. FOREIGN SUBSCRIPTIONS FOR COUNTRIES IN THE POSTAL UNION, FIVE DOLLARS PER YEAR IN ADVANCE.

REMITTANCE TO BE MADE BY INTERNATIONAL POSTAL MONEY ORDER. ENTERED AS SECOND CLASS MATTER, NOVEMBER 6, 1914, AT THE POST OFFICE AT NEW YORK, N. Y., UNDER THE ACT OF MARCH 3, 1879.

Copyright of New Republic is the property of New Republic and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.